

Docs, mental health providers look for better ways to serve young people at meeting in Aptos

By: John Sammon

APTOS --" About 90 pediatricians, doctors and mental health providers assembled to meet each other in person for the first time Tuesday to collaborate on how better to serve the mental health needs of young people.

"This is a grass-roots approach on how we can all come together to improve pediatric health care for children by meeting with pediatricians, family practice physicians, mental health providers like psychiatrists and psychologists, counselors and family therapists, to improve collaboration regarding pediatric mental health issues," said Jim Bennett, event organizer.

Bennett, a pediatrician at Capitola Pediatrics as well as the pediatric medical director at Dominican Hospital, said the goal is to create the county's first comprehensive Pediatric Mental Health Registry of caregivers who deal with pediatrics.

The registry would list pertinent information about each caregiver, phone number and address, their area of expertise, and what their special interests are, allowing for a more streamlined system for referring patients.

"Pediatricians are faced with a situation where we often have need of a mental health specialist," Bennett said. "It might be because of anxiety, depression, an eating disorder, substance abuse or family dysfunction. In the past, doctors and mental health professionals didn't meet and get to know each other. It's been like we were all working in our own separate silos."

The event was held in Aptos at the Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County, a philanthropic organization that connects donors to nonprofits and the causes they represent.

Donations were made to Healthy Kids of Santa Cruz County, a nonprofit that seeks to provide low-income children with health insurance and to improve access to care for children. The system has enrolled 17,000 children countywide, including more than 4,000 children through the Healthy Kids Program.

Leslie Conner, director of Healthy Kids, said the program is locally funded.

"As an example, we also provide coverage for families who make too much to qualify for Medi-Cal or Healthy Kids, but not enough for private health care," Connor said. "Private health insurance today costs over \$12,000 a year for a family of four."

Connor added that 29 other counties also have the program, but many are closing because of budget constraints. She credited local support for preserving the Santa Cruz County program.

Santa Cruz County Health Director Rama Khalsa called the get-to-know-you event the launch to a closer future collaboration between caregivers.

"It's wonderful to have a partnership for better health care for kids," she said.

Khalsa said the last thing a family with a young person who needs help wants to do is wade through a confusing medical bureaucracy.

"We have a combination of increasing medical co-payments and treatment is more difficult to access," she said. "There have been cuts to mental health programs. We're trying to do something about it."